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TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON PINR SA

SUBJECT: KING'S "LANDMARK" TOUR OF SOUTHERN REGION YIELDS  
BIG DIVIDENDS FOR NAJRANIS

Classified By: Political Counselor David Rundell for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdul Azziz arrived in Najran on October 31 for his first visit to the region since ascending the throne. Najranis, who closed their shops and held a festival in honor of the King, prepared for months for the visit. In conjunction with what is being described as a "landmark" tour of the southern region, the King announced the launch of health, education, and infrastructure projects in Najran totaling approximately SR 3.36 billion (USD 893 million). According to Governor of Najran Province Prince Mishaal bin Saud bin Abdul Azziz, these projects include the expansion of Najran's airport (USD 26.6 million), a complex of university colleges for applied sciences (USD 160 million), technical education projects (USD 53 million), including a polytechnic institute for girls, a water desalination project (USD 106 million), electricity projects (USD 2.4 million), and health projects (USD 7.6 million), including a 300-bed hospital, health college, center for the treatment of diabetes, and 41 primary health care centers. Accompanied by numerous SAG officials -- Chairman of the Royal Commission for Yanbu and Jubail Prince Saud bin Abdullah bin Thunayyan, Secretary-General of the Supreme Commission for Tourism Prince Sultan bin Salman, Labor Minister Ghazi al-Qusaibi, and Culture and Information Minister Iyad Madani -- the King will continue his progress to Asir and Jizan Provinces. He is expected to launch the Kingdom's fourth economic city in Jizan on November 5, which analysts say will create approximately 30,000 new jobs in the industrial, mining, and service sectors.

¶2. (C) In addition to the substantial investment in Najran Province's infrastructure, the King's visit yielded additional benefits in good will. Officials estimated that close to 20,000 citizens showed up to submit written complaints to the office the King opened in Najran to accept and review such petitions. He also pardoned a number of Ismaeli prisoners -- including one individual the press identified as a "citizen who was sentenced to 14 years in jail." (NOTE: The King often pardons prisoners on such visits. While the details of the pardons are rarely published, the case of the "citizen sentenced to 14 years" appeared to refer to Hadi al-Mutaif, who was sentenced to death 14 years ago for "blasphemy." His sentence was later commuted to life. The SAG has not confirmed that al-Mutaif was pardoned, and he remains incarcerated. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) Al-Mutaif recently went on a hunger strike in protest of his imprisonment, which resulted in significant domestic and international publicity. Saudi human rights organizations, including the Human Rights First Society, closely followed al-Mutaif's case and advised Post prior to the King's visit to Najran that there was a good possibility

al-Mutaif would be pardoned. Such was the significance of this pardon that television broadcasts of the festivities in Najran were interrupted with news of the King's decision. Finally, the King's public statements were clearly directed to Najran's Ismaeli population, emphasizing unity and brotherhood, as well as lauding the fact that both the SAG and the Ismaelis had honored the pact between the King's father and those of the Ismaelis.

**14. (C) COMMENT:** The last time King Abdullah visited Najran was 20 years ago when he was crown prince. During his October 31 visit, he continued his message of tolerance, unity, and brotherhood -- even going so far as to state that there is no need to look to "outsiders" in order to solve regional problems. (NOTE: There is no indication as to whether the King was referring to any specific issue. END NOTE.) Symbolically, the King made clear the importance of Najran's Ismaeli population by beginning his trip to the southern region with this city -- although coming from Jeddah as he did, geographically, it would have made more sense for him to begin in Asir Province. Most importantly, the King backed up his words with concrete action. The magnitude of investments in Najran where, according to Governor Prince Mishaal, the SAG has thus far invested over USD 3.6 billion in development projects, the King's clear message of tolerance, and his pardons of Ismaeli prisoners are playing out very positively in the Saudi press. It certainly appears to be a concerted effort to reach out to a minority population that has felt marginalized by the Kingdom's Sunni majority. END COMMENT.

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